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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted at the University of Missouri, to examine the use of portfolio assessment in the classroom. Surveys were administered to composition teachers in the Department of English who regularly use portfolios for student grading. Generally, portfolio assessment means that students work on a set of papers during the semester and turn in revised papers representing their best work in a portfolio at the end of the term. This paper records staff responses to the following survey questions: (1) Who determines what papers go into the portfolio? When the portfolio is graded at the end of the semester, is each paper given a grade, or is one grade given for the portfolio? (2) How are students assessed throughout the term? Are students told if they are doing below average work? (3) What sorts of things are looked for when going over student papers? Are student conferences combined with written comments? How often are conferences scheduled during the semester? (4) What differences in teaching or student responses have been noticed in using portfolios as opposed to grading/returning/averaging student papers? (5) Have there been problems with portfolios? Are portfolios more useful in some classes than in others? and (6) What are the advantages and disadvantages of portfolio grading? (LL)

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PORTFOLIOS FOR CLASSROOM USE
A Study Conducted at University of Missouri-Kansas City

edited by
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The following survey was conducted at the University of Missouri-Kansas City among those who teach composition in the Department of English. We at first surveyed our staff to see who was using portfolios in their classrooms. We discovered that about half the staff was.

We wanted to encourage the rest of the staff to try using portfolios, so we thought the best way was to ask those who did use them how they do it. There are many variations on the theme, but generally, a portfolio is a set of writings a student works on throughout the semester. The instructor gives a final assessment at the end of the semester when the student turns in the polished work.

Portfolio grading or assessment is favored by experts in the field of writing assessment for a number of reasons. I won't go into those reasons here because I think our staff does a pretty good job of saying why they find portfolios useful. However I do recommend Portfolios: Process and Product edited by Pat Belanoff and Marcia Dickson for anyone who'd like to find out more.

This survey is concerned with portfolios in the classroom. But portfolios can be used in other ways. At some universities, English majors are required to build a portfolio during their college career and submit it to their department before graduation. There are also programs where portfolios built in a course are then assessed by other faculty members in lieu of a final exam or gatekeeper exam. While we've discussed the possibility of using large scale portfolio assessment here at UMKC, the time and the extra work involved makes it unfeasible for us at the present.

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Portfolio Survey

Portfolio assessment or grading is used at a number of colleges and universities in a variety of ways. Generally, for classroom use, portfolio assessment means students work on a set of papers during the semester and turn in revised papers representing their best work in a portfolio at the end of the term.

Lecturers reported that they used portfolios in all the following composition courses:

EN 100 (Developmental Writing) **EN 110/110A** (Composition I) **EN 225** (Compostion II) **EN 301** (Writing for the Humanities & Social Sciences) **EN 302** (Critical/Evaluative Writing) **EN 304** (Technical Writing) **EN 305** (Theory & Practice of Composition) **EN 306** (Advanced Compostion) **EN 403** (Writing in Cultural Contexts) -- and in--**EN 214** (Intro to Fiction), **EN 215** (Intro to Poetry) and **EN 520 Greater** Kansas City Writing Project

Who determines what papers go into the portfolio? When you do grade the portfolio at the end of the semester, do you give each paper a grade, or do you give one grade for the portfolio?

Mickey Dyer: Students decide which of the personal papers to include, usually 2 out 3; I decide the two major, usually research papers to include. Final drafts only. I give one grade for the entire portfolio. 40% of grade= Double Entry Journals, etc. 60% of grade= portfolio papers

Maureen Maginn: I determine which papers go into the portfolio--all assigned papers do. I give each paper a grade.

Ted Otteson: Students decide.

Sheila Honig: Generally I grade a mid-semester and end-of-semester portfolio. Usually, I determine the papers that go in it, but that varies according to which class I'm teaching. I give each paper a grade.

Danny Rearden: I use a modified system in which I give a grade for the 3rd draft of every paper.

Brooke Fredericksen: The student is allowed to choose from the papers they have written during the semester, as well as from other writings (journal entries, e.g.). Portfolio comprises 65% of students' grade and is graded at the end of the semester. One grade for portfolio.

Lenore Carroll: Students determine--but they are given class time to confer with group members. And I may make suggestions. I give one grade for the portfolio as a whole.

Margaret McCormick: Students select what goes into the portfolio and I assign sets of selections a grade.

Phil Black Students decide. I give each paper a grade and a grade for the portfolio.

Pat Huyett: I decide, but in an ideal situation, I think students should. If I decide it's less work for me in the long run. I give one grade for the portfolio which counts as 70% of their final grade.

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Dan Mahala: All of the student's work goes into the portfolio so that I can view the student's work as a whole, in context. But the quality of only the student's self-selected "best" pieces form the basis of the portfolio grade. The portfolio grade reflects the quality of these selected pieces, as a whole.

How do you assess students throughout the term? Do you give a mid-term grade? Do you tell students if they're doing below average work so they can drop?

M.D.: I respond to each draft during the semester via the enclosed form, "Student/Teacher Draft Response" that begins our dialogue about their writing that continues for each draft. I will give a grade anytime a student asks (and usually they don't). I do not give mid-term grades but students usually have a journal grade to go by. I will tell students if I am worried about their attendance or progress report form which I write on continually as students turn in work to me.
MM: I respond to drafts in letters to the students and in conferences.
TO: I give a preliminary grade for each paper (which may be revised later for the portfolio).
SH: I do give a grade on the mid-semester portfolio. I let students know if they should drop. I have mid-semester conferences and inform them of my perception of their progress.
DR: Grades on drafts and quizzes let them know.
LC: I grade each assignment so they have my feedback as well as their group's, or as they go along. Usually they drop without my telling them. If they're not passing at midterm, I tell them.
BF: Students are continuously writing drafts and papers and are graded on their papers. They also have conferences with me and they are generally aware of the average of their grades. I do not give a mid-term grade.
MMC: I let students know if they should drop. Portfolio work comes from non-graded writing done during the semester. I have them write often.
PB: I assess students by looking at their revisions and by class contributions.
PH: I tell students they can assume they're making at least a "C" unless I tell them otherwise. I record a "secret" or unofficial grade for the first paper just in case someone insists on knowing what the grade would be. I don't give a mid-term grade.
DM: I give formative responses to students as they write throughout the term. No grade is given to their work, but my language of response, and the questions I pose are often evaluative. So the student has a pretty good idea of my opinion of their progress. I tell them that if they're doing less than C work I'll let them know. I also tell them that, if not getting grades until the end makes them nervous, I'll appraise any piece (as if it were a representative sample of their final portfolio),but almost no one takes me up on it.

Assuming you reserve grades for midterm or semester's end, what sorts of things do you look for when you go over student papers? Generally, how do you mark papers? Do you combine student conferences with written

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comments? How often do you schedule conferences during the semester?

MD: I hand out Grading Standards at the beginning of the term which we discuss and use to evaluate sample papers. We also set up evaluation criteria for each paper and talk about what might need to be stressed for each paper. I mark "problem" areas, such as the punctuation in one paragraph if that seems to be a problem, but I do not mark up an entire paper. I concentrate first of all on finding a central idea, then organization and so on. Usually the last two weeks we concentrate on editing techniques. I also respond to what they want me to as indicated on the Revised Draft Response sheet. 99% of the time student writers know their strengths and weaknesses so I just help them develop their strengths. I hold one "official" conference, which means I let out class for one or two times during the semester. Unofficial conferences are any time. I also use mini-lessons before group work to prepare them to look for certain qualities in the paper they are responding to. If a student want to know a grade for a paper, the student must bring me a draft to be graded and answer for me first what grade she thinks it is. If you practice grading in class, students usually agree with you and they just end up giving it first.

MM: I look at "global" stuff first--purpose, audience, thesis, development/illustration/support/organization, and the logic of all of it. I only "mark" them when I need to point out textual problems that would take too long to describe in a letter--but I either refer to the marks in the letter or discuss them with the student in conference. I put a lot of emphasis on their developing critical and evaluative skills--through group response and self-evaluation and grading sample essays. I see an evolving draft several times. I schedule two conferences and let students schedule additional conferences whenever they want.

TO: I look for the same four elements as in our grading standards--plus responsiveness to the assignment. I make over-all positive and negative comments. Mark a few representative "language use" areas. At least one conference per semester.

SH: I use the published grading standards when I evaluate student papers. I generally use a separate sheet(s) of paper for my comments on their portfolios. At the mid-semester conference I combine written comments with student conferences. I schedule at least one formal conference per student per semester.

DR: I schedule 3-4 conferences during the semester:
Draft one: written and peer group responses
Draft two: conference-oral response
Draft three--grade and written response
Then students may re-submit papers until the end of the semester.

LC: We go over criteria for each assignment in class. I read or share sample papers when possible. They get a handout of criteria. I answer questions about assignments. I write a note with a grade for each major assignment.

BF: I do <u>not</u> reserve grades; I grade each paper. My main foci are: thesis/focus; general structure & order; support and examples; last of all, sentence structure/grammar & punctuation & citation format. I give extensive written comments on each paper plus I arrange student conferences after drafts are turned in. I try to schedule at least three conferences per semester.

MMC: I have one conference a semester.

PB: I look for a pattern of thought--a process reflected in their revision.

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I comment/ask some as I go, but mostly I give comments at the end. My comments are like this: "I don't understand this section at all." When I have conferences usually 30-60 minutes) we talk about their progress, life, etc. I schedule conferences twice/semester, but I do lots of workshops in class so they have time to approach me.

PH: I look to see if they're making a point and how well they're making it. I ask a lot of questions because I feel that usually they need to develop their ideas more. I don't mark up an entire paper--I make marginal notes and write a note summarizing my reactions at the end of the paper. I let them know if I see a particular problem, such as diction and how they might fix that. I schedule at least two conferences per student each semester and I encourage students to come in and talk with me whenever they feel they need to.

DM: Before the end of the term I'll usually hold a conference and point (along with the grade they think they deserve). If there's a big disagreement (which is somewhat unusual) we'll hash it out. Other times we agree, or I'll say their estimate is a little too high or too low.

Sometimes, I'll hold conferences weekly, or biweekly, as a substitute for most written response. I think this works best for the students, though I'm not always up for it.

When I do grade the portfolios at the end I'm usually not surprised. (There are some exceptions!) I read the clean copy of the student's best work (say, twenty pages) straight through, consider the distance they've traversed to culminate their inquiry in this text, and give a portfolio grade. (Other factors too, like participation and attendance, count in the final grade). After I've given a portfolio grade and a final grade, I'll write a response justifying them, if the student requested one. It's curious to me that I almost never change the grade as a result of having to articulate reasons for it.

What differences in your teaching or student responses have you noticed in using portfolios as opposed to grading/returning/averaging student papers?

MD: I think my students learn that writing is a process, they learn what strengths they have as opposed to all of the weaknesses they have heard before, they learn to read writing more effectively because we practice it all semester. My teaching has changed because they allow me to be their user-friendly source of writing information instead of The Evaluator. Perhaps I just give them more hope about their writing because I don't evaluate it right away. I also involve them in the process more because they are responsible for their writing as well as a self-evaluation of their portfolio.
In English 305, for future teachers, I do "mock" grade the first paper show them how I evaluate by the grading standards. This allows us to talk about he grading system and how students feel by getting nor getting one. They are allowed to keep the grade or rewrite all semester.

AM: Students are less dependent on my skills and develop their own more. Essays improve in major ways--not just the teacher-directed ways(often first-aid type) in which they "changed" before I used portfolios.

TC: Students revise more and have less grade anxiety.

SH: Students who take advantage of the extra time and my comments and those of their peers generally write better papers. Doing some kind of portfolio system puts the

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emphasis on revision more than traditional evaluations do. I think some kind of portfolio system helps me to slow down a little as an instructor. It helps me diffuse an "assembly line" attitude for me and my students.

DR: Improved revision skills--students work harder, have less resentment over grades.

LC: I forget what it was like before. Each assignment had too much importance and there was no 2nd chance to revise. I have a second chance to instruct over things I forgot or they didn't catch. I enjoy reading the revised portfolio versions.

BF: I like the concept of using a portfolio, especially in English 225, because it gives the students more control over their grade, their work, their learning. I always emphasize the fact that the students have to make the choices of what to include and have to take responsibility for revisions. Students like the idea that they can have input on their grades in more than just doing individual papers; in other words, they can materially affect their grades by putting in some real work on a portfolio. As far as I can tell, students seem to like this method.

MMC: Dunno...Have never used them <u>instead</u>, have always used them <u>with</u>.

PB: I feel more comfortable addressing what they need--critical thinking through revision. I believe the key to portfolios is for the teacher to be really good at teaching revision/getting students to honestly revise--that handles a lot of the "what's my grade?" syndrome.

PH: Portfolios make me feel as if I'm more of a coach and less of a judge. Students do have some anxiety about grades, but they also feel as though they have more chances to "get it right." I don't mark papers in order to justify grades any more--and I feel I have more invested in their work, too. I try to look at their papers as a concerned reader. The exciting thing about portfolios is I can actually see the progress they're making--students can set realistic goals for themselves and I can help them with that process.

DM: I like the portfolio system because it challenges my students to recognize the complexity of reader responses, and not reduce them to a single number. How many times does a student give me a paper that I think is better than previous work in some ways but worse in others? I think most of the students feel the delay in grades gives them more space to take some risks, to play with language and ideas, to tolerate the uncertainty generated by feedback. Most of the students want me to guide them, and I do. But, in the past, as soon as I would tie my "guidance" to a number on a single scale, I would find them phasing out, or reacting as if I'd just given marching orders: "I could find a more provocative angle Mr. M if only you'll tell me what you want." I don't want to play this role, and when students cast me in it, I resist.

Have you have had some problems with portfolios? Have you found them less useful in some classes than others? Please explain.

MD: Because I evaluate at the end, I have felt uncomfortable trying to remember everything about certain drafts. This made grading more difficult and I think too subjective. I devised the progress report to help me remember and help me be more objective. Did a student indeed revise, use more sources, overcome a difficulty, improve a weakness?

I have felt uncomfortable doing a portfolio in which I chose every paper--that is not a portfolio. I like students being able to choose which of personal response papers to

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include; I like selecting the research papers because I still like to be in charge. (Haha)
MM: Some students are so conditioned to be directed that they feel clueless and powerless with the new responsibility. But this can become one of the subjects of cultural studies courses.
TO: I've tried it without grading each paper when it is first done--grading only at the semester's end caused too much anxiety.
SH: Students who have never experienced a portfolio system of evaluating sometimes lack the discipline required to take advantage of what it offers or are a little overwhelmed by having to work on more than one paper at a time.
DR: Well, with grades--students are, I've found, obsessive about them. They really feel they need them. I don't like that, but I also feel one grade at the end of the semester is not fair to them.
LC: If I inflate grades at the start of the semester to give positive reinforcement, students have no reason to revise to improve the portfolio grade. I try to hand the portfolio grades out before the end of the semester so they know what they got. Then they do one more small assignment. I don't want portfolios and final exams all at once; I feel frantic.

It takes a certain maturity or fear or ambition for the concept to work. Some students blow it off and hand in un-revised papers. (I blow off their grades). The teacher has to be very clear on the mechanical details of how it works or the students are confused. I'm still fine tuning instructions. Since I've read the papers once, I require my comments and the original draft to come in with the revised portfolio version so I can see how much revision the student did and how effective their efforts were.
BF: The one problem I had was that students seem to mistake 65% (the percentage the portfolio comprises of their grade) for 100%, and I have had several come to me demanding a higher grade because they thought their portfolio was perfect.
MMC: I don't use them in technical writing.
PB: I'm really sold on them. In fact, I think anything less than full blown portfolios (for me) takes away from the point as it buys into the grade intensive method.
PH: It's harder in courses such as Intro to Poetry because there are so many students, so I use a modified system there. I'd like it better if I my classes were limited to 20 students or so--then I'd probably have them write more essays and choose the best ones. I do keep track of who's given me revisions throughout the semester, otherwise I'd forget.
DM: Sometimes students criticize my course because I don't grade as a regular feature of the class. Maybe I need to move up the grade conference to earlier in the term (say, five or six weeks before the end) so that we know if we're in the same ballpark or not earlier in the term. But I feel ambivalent about this. Some of the criticisms might be attributable to the obsession with "the bottom line," a desire for simple answers, or other tendencies in our culture that we should resist. On the other hand, students deserve fair, above-board dealing about grades.

Briefly describe what you see as the advantages and disadvantages of portfolio assessment.

MD: Advantages: greater student involvement in writing and critical thinking and

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reading greater focus on writing as a process, not lip-service, we really do it--we don't ignore evaluation, but it does not control us; I like to think my students write more for themselves or their peers and not for me (until the last two weeks when panic sets in). Disadvantages: 3/4 of the way through the semester, you believe you have failed each of your students (teacher panic) and it is too late to change the system. The progress report and self-evaluation help eliminate the burden of grading everything at the end, but there are still several drafts to read through.

MM: I think it's possible to distort and misuse anything. If the teacher loses her vision and sense of purpose regarding the use of portfolios in the context of her whole pedagogy, it's not just meaningless--it's confusing and disempowering for all involved. But when she knows--or is actively engaged in discovering--what portfolio assessment can be to her and to her students, it can be a powerful cultural studies tool, something that can enable students to gain the very skills we have.

DR: Advantages: 1) allows student to write at their own pace, in their own way.
2) Subverts the evaluation "ranking their work" syndrome.
3) Emphasizes revision as the key element of composing.
Disadvantages: 1) Paperload!
2) We can often send students "the wrong signals" if we don't let them know how they're doing in class overall.

LC: The students have the chance to apply what they've learned over the semester. They may choose not to; they may have learned nothing.

BF: I think portfolios give students the chance to take responsibility for their own work by giving them the opportunity to choose and evaluate and revise and compile a presentation of their "best" writing. I would highly recommend portfolio use to any teacher of writing.

MMC: Advantages--Students write more during the semester. Students get credit for certain ungraded writing. Students get to exercise judgment. Teacher can see development of students' judgment over the course of the semester. Most successful when this process includes peer review.

PB: The main thing: students learn to quit worrying about grades and writing for grades. You, as a teacher have a whole semester to convince these people that writing can be done for other reasons. Of course, if you are successful, you may end up with a lot of high grades. If you don't do a good job, you end up with potential law suits.

PH: There are always going to be students who think their work is better than you do. Some students can't handle the responsibility. You can't force someone to revise if they don't want to. But ultimately out there in the real world, they're going to have to be their own editors, so that's a choice they make. The main advantage I see is that I truly feel as if I'm teaching writing. It's gratifying to see students' work improve. Before, I felt as though I had an almost adversarial relationship with students--now I feel more as if we're in this together. I haven't had the end-of-semester headaches some people do because usually by the time I see the portfolio I'm familiar with what's in it. I really don't spend that much time reading at the end--not like I thought I would when I first started using portfolios. If you think grade inflation is a disadvantage, then that's a problem. But I don't see it as a problem, and if I grade a little higher than I did before, then I'd like to think I'm a more effective teacher and that my students really are revising more and therefore doing better.

DM: The main danger I see in the portfolio system is that teachers can, if they are uncomfortable with their authority as teachers, evade their responsibility to guide and evaluate the students' work throughout the term. Especially beginning teachers, I think, can avoid dealing with how they feel about their role as evaluator, so that when they are finally compelled to address this issue late in the semester, their actual responses are not at all what they or their students had thought. By then, though, problems are too late to remedy.

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